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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the role of the black church in black American history and suggests ways in which its role must change to help blacks cope with our modern and technological society. Initially, religion was the one social institution which gave black slaves a common tie before the Civil War. Baptist and Methodist ideologies provided emotional messages of salvation, and Bible stories told orally appealed to the slaves' aspirations for freedom and liberation. After the Civil War black churches became institutionalized. They increased their efforts to improve quality of life by establishing colleges, insurance companies, and political groups. In recent years, black churches have placed more emphasis on economic, social, and political problems than on otherworldly concerns of salvation. Two groups can now be identified: storefront churches and more traditional, institutionalized churches. The author suggests that the black church increase its role of leadership in directing blacks toward a high spiritual quality of life which may not necessarily be the same as the modern American materialistic approach to life. (AV)

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Symposium on Critical Issues Affecting the
Quality of Life for Black Americans: Year 2000

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Paper

BIBLICAL FAITH, ETHICS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE QUEST AMONG BLACK AMERICANS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

By Carl H. Marbury, Ph.D.

The single most important force in the lives of black Americans down through the ages has been the impact and reality of religion. The concern for ethical values, the reverence for life, the philosophical raison d'etre of existence are for the most part grounded in some variation of a religious weltanschauung. His faith undergirded him during the long "dark night of the soul" of slavery and sustained him in the nihilistic years following the Civil War. The black church forged there from became the cultural depository and vehicle for the expression of meaning in life.

Ostensibly, the evolution of the black church has been tempered by the complex factors influencing the wholistic texture of life in a technological age of rapid change. Science has challenged its religious underpinnings. This challenge makes it necessary for the black church to update old philosophies and a declining interest in traditional patterns of thought. The many social pressures have prodded great portions of the public into an activist attitude demanding that all existing institutions apply their resources to the solution of difficult problems. The concomitant has been a lessening of the cultural impact of the church and a waning interest in religion in general among black people. Such a development undoubtedly have important and deep implications for scholarly research as it relates to the future and quality of life of black people in America.

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The black church, while not being the force it once was, still possesses tremendous potential and resources for enhancing the quality of life for black Americans. It remains the one place where black people of all levels continue

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to come together in order to get a "hold and/or perspective on life." The church is not the emotional outlet it used to be and is slowly becoming a programcenter for addressing the total needs of black masses. In urban areas, churches are sponsoring day care centers for children of working mothers, educational and community programs and housing projects undertaken with special federal support to nonprofit organizations. This evolving sophistication and the corresponding societal complexities of a pluralistic society heighten the need for research, critical evaluation, testing and examination of religious phenomena among black people as we approach the epochal year of 2000 A.D.

The black family and the black church have been the twin anchor institutions that have buoyed a maligned and an oppressed people.[1] Historical circumstances barred black people from full and equal participation in any of the public institutions of the country, they were not permitted to develop their own in most realms of life. The black American was "free" in an ironic sense - to develop his own family and his own religious life.

By American racist and caste rules, no person of any degree of known black ancestry could be "kin" to any person supposedly of no such ancestry. Black Americans had to make their own family institutions. White Americans, who became masters because they had black slaves, having made Christians of their field hands, did not want to commune with them from the same cup. As a consequence, at birth, confirmation, communion, marriage, death and all the great turning points and festivals, black and white were alien to each other. The separation was not quite reciprocal. Blacks were often spectators, and more, of the intimate life of whites, while the whites - although they had no shame about intruding - saw little of the intimate life of blacks. Religion and family became foci of black life in a special degree.[2]

Alex Haley in his epochal classic Roots has brought home to us through book and screen the cruel reality of our past history. When one studies any phase of the character and the development of the social and cultural life of the black in the United States, one must recognize from the beginning that because of the manner in which blacks were captured in West Africa and enslaved, they were practically stripped of their social heritage. By the manner of their capture for the slave markets the situation tended to reduce to a minimum the possibility of the retention and the transmission of African culture.[3] It is evident that the sustained dehumanization process tended to loosen all social bond, among blacks and to destroy the traditional basis of social cohesion. In addition, the organization of labor and the system of social control and discipline on the plantation both tended to prevent the development of social cohesion either on the basis of whatever remnants of African culture might have survived or on the basis of the blacks' role in the plantation economy.[4]

Some scholars have tended to be conservative at this point. They assert that social cohesion among the slaves was not destroyed to the extent some scholars think to have been the case. For example, W.E.B. DuBois felt that social cohesion among the slaves was not totally destroyed. For in one of his studies of black life he makes the assertion that the black church was the only social institution among the blacks which started in the African forest and survived slavery and that under the leadership of the priest and medicine man, the church preserved the remnants of African tribal life.[5]

E. Franklin Frazier seems correct when he asserts that it was not what remained of African culture or African religious experience but a "blackenized" Christian religion that provided the new basis of social cohesion. The adopted and adapted Christian faith was a key vehicle for creating solidarity among a people who lacked social cohesion and a structured social life.

Carter G. Woodson thinks that blacks tended to resist conversion to Christianity at first.[6] Apparently, the Church of England, the Moravians, the Quakers, Presbyterians and the Catholics had little success in this regard. Instead, the dawn of the new day in the religious development of blacks occurred when the Methodists and Baptists began proselyting the blacks. These activities on the part of Methodist and Baptists, as well as the less extensive missionary work of the Presbyterians, were a phase of the Great Awakening which began in New England and spread to the West and finally to the South.[7] When the Methodists and Baptists began their revivals in the South, large numbers of blacks were immediately attracted to this type of religious worship.[8] However, it was not until after the American Revolution that large masses of the black population became converts and joined the Methodist and Baptist churches.

Why did our black forefathers and mothers respond to those two denominations so readily? The response was psychological and phenomenological rather than historical. It is most likely that Baptist and Methodist preachers, who lacked the education of the minister of the established churches, appealed to the poor, the uneducated and the outcast. Many of those attending the revivals and camp meetings found in the fiery message of salvation a hope and a prospect of escape from their earthly woes. In addition, the emphasis which the preachers placed upon feeling as a sign of conversion found a ready response in the slaves whose lives had little hope and little quality. The slaves who had been torn from their homeland, kinsmen and friends and whose cultural heritage was lost, were isolated and broken human beings, so to speak. In the emotionalism of the camp meetings and revivals some social solidarity, even if fleeting and temporary,

was achieved, and they were drawn into a union with their fellowmen. Later, common religious beliefs, practices and tradition, tended to provide a new basis of social cohesion and quality of life for blacks in an alien and hostile environment.

The uprooting of blacks and the transport of them in galley ships to a foreign land had a shattering effect upon the quality of life for black people. In destroying their traditional culture and in breaking up their social organization, slavery deprived them of their accustomed orientation towards the world. The slaves were not "savages" for the peoples from which the slaves were drawn possessed developed systems of religious beliefs concerning their place in nature and in society.[9]

It was through the medium of the Bible that blacks found the keys for a new human orientation.[10] Of course, the slave masters intended otherwise. There were some misgivings and in some instances strong opposition to acquainting blacks with the Bible. This fear of teaching the slaves the Bible was tied up with the laws against teaching slaves to read or write. But it was also feared that the slave could find in the Bible the implications of human equality and social justice which would incite the black man to make efforts to free himself. On this, the slave masters were exactly right.[11] The theological hermeneutics for black preachers was directly antithetical to that of their white counterparts who attempted to justify slavery biblically.

The Bible was the means by which the blacks acquired a new theology and a new weltanschauung. The vivid stories from the Bible were told in simple language to the slaves in an "oral tradition" fashion. In time, the slaves became thoroughly familiar with the well known Biblical characters and their role in the drama of salvation as it was presented to the black man. Through the medium

of the new griot - the black preacher, the stories of the Bible were dramatized for the black community and many characters and incidents were "hermeneuticized" in terms of the black man's experiences. The Biblical stories were typologized and indigenized in terms of the authentic human aspirations of a people hungering for freedom and liberation. In providing a living theology and thereby a new human orientation towards the world and persons in community, the Bible provided the black community with the rich imagery which characterized the sermon of black preachers and the sacred spirituals and folk-songs of black Americans. And so, the black slave found in Christianity a new theology as well as a new orientation towards the world at large. By doing so he adapted and rearranged the Christian religion to his psychological, social and emotional needs. [12]

It was out of the "real life" and deeply existential situation that the black church emerged as the "invisible institution". It was an actual fact that all forms of organized social effort were forbidden among the slaves. In the absence of an established priesthood, the black preacher simply emerged on the scene (somewhat akin to the emergence of the judges in the history of the Jews). This preacher (or griot in a foreign land) played the important role in the invisible institution of the Church among the slaves. The black preacher was called to his office to preach and through this authority and his personal qualities, he achieved a position of leadership. The call always came through some specific religious experience (similar to Paul's on the Damascus road) which indicated that God had chosen him as a spiritual leader.[13] Some time after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, the authority to preach was institutionalized by license and ordination, usually by the black Methodist or Baptist church.

This synopsis of black American religious history is somewhat abbreviated. Under no circumstances do I want to indicate that this aspect of black history was simple i.e., without complexity. I wish to underscore initially the fact that for a

long while in the history of black people in this country, the black church through which they expressed their religious aspirations, was the sole non-family institution serving to enhance the quality of life of our forefathers and mothers. Blacks who were free before the Civil War left the white Methodist and Baptist church organizations in which they had a subordinate status and set up their own churches. After the abolition of slavery the "invisible institution" became visible and was absorbed by the institutional churches which blacks who were free before the Civil War had established.[14] Thus, after the states passed segregation laws, ensuring the separation of blacks from the mainstream of American life, the church communities in the South became a sort of nation within a nation.

The black church then was the key vehicle for improving and enhancing the quality of life of the slave and later on - the "free man." Out of the church organizations emerged other forms of organized activities among the blacks who were free before the Civil War. After Emancipation the enlarged organization played an even more important role in the social organization of the newly freed black community. They established academies, institutes and colleges. They were responsible not only for economic co-operation for the purpose of erecting and buying churches, but they also provided the incentive for the pooling of the meagre economic means of blacks for mutual assistance and insurance companies. The black church organization became the most important arena for political life among black Americans. The important role of religion and the black church in the social organization of black Americans has been due to the restricted participation of blacks in American society. And as a consequence, the black church has left its imprint upon practically every aspect of black life.

Now the important questions are - whither black religion and what does the future hold for the black church as we move toward the year 2000? Is religion an "opiate of the people" as proposed by Karl Marx? Has the black church served

its purpose and is no longer viable as a social vehicle in a technological age? Are there viable alternatives to either the black church or the black family as we prepare for the twenty-first century?

Urbanization and rapid technological change on a large and intensive scale beginning with World War I have brought about a transformation of the black church and radically altered the weltanschauung of blacks in this country. There has been a corresponding secularization of outlook and black churches have been caught up in that on-going process. Indeed, more and more black churches have placed less emphasis upon the otherwordly and salvation after death and instead have directed their activities increasingly to the economic, social, and political problems of black people. But, all the signs indicate that they are not reaching and/or serving the real needs of the black masses and are in fact losing numbers in comparison to the increasing total population of blacks in the country. The onslaught of modernization, rapid change, urbanization and impersonal secularization are "taking their toll" on the black populace especially among our young men. Such maladies as drug addition, suicide, hypertension, high blood pressure, psychological stress,heart attacks and death from cancer are on the increase among black people. These human conditions will require our very best research regarding the facts and at the same time a more specific program for addressing them in the light of that research. A very straightforward question has to be raised at this point and that is - what role, if any, should religion and/or the black church play with regards to the quality of life question.

This is not a mere academic concern, if indeed, we are really concerned about the black masses. The new realities among blacks is somewhat as follows: A subtle reorganization of the religious life of blacks in the urban centers has taken place where there is a pronounced new class structure within the black

community. This is especially the case in the large cities in the North because of the increasing occupational differentiation and the concentration of black professionals. An "upper" strata and "lower" strata are slowly emerging into distinct groupings. Among the upper strata there has been a shift from the Baptist and Methodist churches to the Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregational and to a smaller degree, the Roman Catholic.[15]

The lower strata is expanding as the "storefront" churches crop up all over the place. The people found in such churches are uncomfortable in "high class" churches and are unwelcome there because they prefer a place of worship where one can say "amen" above a whisper and where they can "shout" if moved by the Spirit. They are turned off by the impersonal atmosphere of the large and urban institutional black church. In recent years a sizeable number of urban blacks have turned away from traditional Christianity and have instead turned to sects, cults and nationalistic religious groups.

In closing, I would have to conclude that religion, black theology, the black church and what have you must be examined, scrutinized, evaluated, etc. in terms of their worth, value and usefulness for addressing the "real-life and human condition of the black masses who are "aliens" still in their own homeland. Highly skilled black professionals and those who have made it economically to the middle class can adjust and adapt to the technological age. They can simply join the"rat race" and be done with it. The fact of the matter is that black theologians and scholars of religion must really concern themselves with a new philosophy of religion and that kind of ethical value system which will foster new possibilities for a higher quality of life for the black masses of people.[16] We simply cannot afford a cleavage between black groups and/or classes. We are caught however, on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, we have to "reach back" and deal with the human condition of our brothers and sisters who were not as fortunate as we

were. On the other hand, we have to move forward to address the realities of increasing technologized and impersonal existence.

It still has not dawned upon many Americans that due to the fact that we are running out of oil, certain raw materials and other resources, we will of necessity have to retrench and change our life styles. A radical transformation is called for in the not too distant future. We cannot go on like we are going for much longer or we may have no "existence" at all to really be concerned about.

In recent years, the liberal ethic said that whereas in the past, blacks have been prevented fulfilling their potential in an open society, this is to be forgotten, and if now blacks will only strive to bring themselves up to the standards of the majority society, they will of course be allowed assimilation into middle-class America. But, is this right and what ought to be? Can black people afford to view their own history as separate and apart from the exploitations of non-white peoples in the Third World. And racial and/or human exploitation in this country, far from being at an end, is in fact being carried to new heights through sophisticated and subtle means.

Is joining "the system" as <u>it is</u> a goal worth hoping for and worth attaining even if it was an actual possibility? Perhaps black people should reject the values of the majority society. The quality of life which the white middle class has obtained with material success provides a <u>high standard of living</u> but not necessarily a <u>high quality of living</u>.

Black people are at "the fork of the road" so to speak. We are presented with an interesting and all-important paradox. On the one hand, blacks are striving to gain the good life which American and European technology has developed. On the other hand acceptance of this good life requires participation in a society that is essentially anti-humane and anti-humanistic. Entry into this

"hardware society" implies a definite negation and denial of black heritage. It is next to impossible to succeed in the dominant white society and still remain relevant to the rest of the black community. An important question for us therefore is - can we continue to be governed by the so-called "Prostetant ethic" and the general concept of competition embodied in the practice of capitalism. L.H. Laphan capsuled the heart of the matter:[17]

> "Given the American capacity for transforming anything and everything into an article of merchandise, nobody can escape the seductions or the intimidations of money. That so many people refuse the others and resist the threats testifies to their larger understanding of the character of human life. They make their choices not so much on moral grounds as on the basis of empirical observations, because the obsession with money, as witness the long and unhappy life of Howard Hughes, reduces a man to the gibbering sycophancy of a frightened ape."

One would hope that as the black community strives to gain the material components necessary to a truly human existence, that it not "lose its soul" nor fall prey to seduction into an inherently exploitive system. No black person can even afford to become successful at another's expense nor refuse to involve himself deeply in his brother's struggle. Black capitalism, whatever that means, cannot ape white capitalism so that a few blacks are co-opted into the system at the expense of all others.

It would appear to me that black religious groups and/or the black church should be in the vanguard of society as we are compelled to consider new exigencies for the twenty-first century. After all, blacks have had more existential experience at adapting to hard realities than anyone else in this country. A developing totalitarian complex of technology and war capability threatens either to destroy us or dehumanize us with the artifacts of impersonal existence. Our runaway technology is creating an inhuman future. It seems to destroy everything in its path - be it landscape, people, tradition or social institutions. The imperialism of technology knows no natural or ideological boundaries.

Black religion and/or theology must take the lead in making a commitment to the quality of life, to humaneness and to human welfare. The stakes are great and it is all but impossible that we can fulfill our tremendous task to the masses by imitating the competitive nature of American society. We are playing, so to speak, another man's game with "his" set of rules. We are bound to lose. A black society should be a humane society - open to all- where each human being has sacred worth and value. On this score it would be wise if we would ponder the words of Frantz Fanon:[18]

> "When I search for man in the techniques and style of Europe, I see only a succession negations of man and an avalanche of murders. The human conditions, plans for mankind, and collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity are new problems, which demand true invention. Let us decide not to imitate Europe, let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man ..."

Footnotes

[1]See H. Gutman The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925, New York: Pantheon, 1976, and E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America, New York: Schocken Books 1964. Gutman's study persuasively disputes the notion that slavery destroyed the black family structure.

[2]Cf. W.R. Traynham, Christian Faith in Black and White, Wakefield, Massachusetts; Parameter Press, Inc., 1973. Cf. also James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970 and Black Theology and Black Power, New York: Seabury Press, 1969.

[3]Cf. Alex Haley, Roots:The Saga of an American Family, New York: Doubleday, 1976. The book dramatically details slave family life - birth, courtship, marriage ("jumping the broom"), death and the ever present fear of being sold off and having to leave your kin. Prior to being placed on ships docked on African shores, the slaves were held in baracoons, an euphemistic term for concentration camps at the time, where the slaves without any regard for sex or family and tribal affiliations were kept.

[4]See U.B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery, New York, 1936 and F. Bancroft, Slave-Trading in the Old South, Baltimore 1939. Cf. W.D. Jordan, White Over Black, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968.

[5]W.E.B. Dubois, Some Efforts of the American Negroes for Their Own Betterment, Atlanta, 1898. It is striking that the griot, a tribal historian in West African tribal societies, plays a similar role to that of the country black preacher. But it is still next to impossible to establish any distinct continuity between African religious practices and the black church in America. The available evidence is inconclusive; cf. P. Mercier, "The Fon in Dahomey", in African Worlds, London, 1954. Mercier makes a persuasive argument in this regard by showing that with the breaking up or destruction of the clan and kinship organization, the religious myths and cults of a culture lose their significane.

[6]Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church, 2nd ed., Washington, D.C., 1921, Chapter II.

[7]See J. Tracy, A History of the Great Awakening, Boston, 1892; pp 81-2.

[8]To this day black Baptist churches and many black Methodist churches conduct annual soul stirring preaching revivals.

[9]See African Worlds with an "Introduction" by Daryll Forde (London, 1954) which contains studies of the world outlook and religious attitudes of a number of African peoples. In the crisis which they experienced the slaves appealed to their ancestors and their gods. But their ancestors and their gods were unable to help them. Some slaves committed suicide during the "middle passage" while others sought the same means of escape from bondage in the new environment.

[10-11]Opposition to teach the black man the Bible declined as the slave masters became convinced by unscrupulous white theologians that sufficient justification for slavery could be found in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, some of the masters became convinced that some of the best slaves - that is, those susceptible to control by their masters - were those who read the Bible. On this see Susan M. Fickling, Slave-Conversion in South Carolina; 1830-1860 (University of South Carolina, 1924), p. 18.

[12]One of the best resources of information on the manner in which the slaves adapted Christianity to his peculiar psychological, social and emotional needs is to be found in that great body of sacred folk music known as the "Negro Spirituals." The "spirituals" were not as some have contended, invested with a revolutionary meaning nor did they represent dusguised plans for escape from slavery. Cf. Miles M. Fisher, Negro Slave Songs in the United States, (Ithaca, 1953), and John Lovell, "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual" Journal of Negro Education (October, 1939). Frazier (The Negro Church in America, p. 12) is correct when he says that no such sophistication existed for the songs simply express the awe and wonder of the black man in regard to life and death, his deeply human and emotional reactions to the complexity of his existence and his desire to escape from the uncertainties, the despair and the frustrations of a cruel world.

[13]It is no mere coincident that Nat Turner and a host of others were preachers. According to Frederick Douglas in Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Chicago, 1882), p. 31, the preacher was one of the slave notabilities.

[14]There apparently was some conflict between the two elements because the former slaves preferred a more primitive form of worship and continued the religious tradition represented in the Spirituals. Nevertheless, the two elements fused in church organizations which became the major form of organized social life among blacks.

[15]The emerging black middle class has tended to reject the black heritage including the religious heritage. Many have abandoned religion altogether but more often shifts affiliation from "so-called "low" church to "high" church.

[16]See J.B. Magee, Religion and Modern Man, New York: Harper and Row, 1967, pp. 19ff.

[17]Cf. L.N. Lapham, "The Capitalist Paradox", Harper's Magazine, (March, 1977). pp. 34-37. See also R. Lichtman, "Captialism and Consumption", Socialist Revolution I (May-June, 1970), pp. 83-96; J.P. Marquand, Point of No Return, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1949; G. Katora, The Mass Consumption Society, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964 and J. Ellul, The Technological Society. Tr. J. Wilkinson, New York: Vintage Books, 1964.

[18]F. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth. Translated from the French by Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963.